

Sustainable Tourism in the Kaçkar Mountains National Park, Turkey

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Abstract

Turkey forms a natural bridge between the continents of Asia, Africa and Europe. In particular, the country occupies a unique geographical position at the crossroads between Central Asia and Middle East. The Kaçkar Mountain National Park is situated in the East Black Sea Region in the north-eastern corner of Turkey. The Park was created in 1994 and covers 51,500 hectares.

The Kaçkar Mountain National Park includes the highest and longest Mountain chain of the East Black Sea Mountains with the Kaçkar (3,932 m) as the highest peak. The Mountain massif of the Kaçkar also represents one of the most highly glaciated areas of the Turkey mountains. Today, there are five large glaciers in the Kaçkar Mountain National Park. The Kaçkar Mountain National Park contribute to the biological diversity of the East Black Sea Mountains. The Park displays a splendid natural scenery of mountains and cultural resources.

In recent years, the National Park is a well known and popular destination for Turkish tourists and is visited by a growing number of foreign tourists as well. The characteristic feature of tourism here is its seasonality having its peak during summer months. The average number of tourists per year is over 100.000 visitors.

There are 11 villages and 44 *yaylas* in the park. (Summer pasture Turkish word is *yayla*. Seasonal herders living in the East Black Sea Region use the national park as a pastureland. Their housing is of a more permanent style in the *yaylas*.) Tourism activities being carried out in the Kaçkar Mountain National Park in recent years provide a significant contribution to the rural economy. Owing to both its natural features and cultural structure, the area has become one of the important points of attraction for mountain and this context mostly include climbing, trekking, camping, heliski, photography, flora, fauna and natural beauty-seeing, meeting the local people who live in *yaylas* and learning about their lifestyle. Owing to these activities, the local people earn from accommodation, transportation, sovenir sales, guidance services, etc., which further add to rural economy. The accommodation potential of the park amounts about 1000 beds.

The national park has also problems with overcrowded tourist locations at sites with high biodiversity values. Negative impacts of tourism are e.g. increased air, water, noise and visual pollution, harms made to the natural assets, flora and fauna and erosion. Another problem is the absence of comprehensive management plans as well. So, the protected status of the national park makes sustainable approach to tourism development necessary. In

recent years, there is co-operation with national park managers, NGOs, and voluntary organisations which promotes sustainable tourism that helps to protect the biodiversity or support environmental education of local inhabitants.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, protected mountain areas, Kaçkar Mountains, Turkey

Introduction

Turkey forms a natural bridge between the continents of Asia, Africa and Europe. In particular, the country occupies a unique geographical position at the crossroads between Central Asia and Middle East.

Turkey lies within the geologically young folded-mountain zone of Eurasia, which extends predominantly east to west. Its topographic structure shows the Country's high elevation in comparison to its neighbors, about one-fourth of the surface having an elevation above 1,200 m, and less than two-fifths lies below 500 m. Mountain crests exceed 2,000 m in many places, particularly in the east, where Turkey's highest mountain, Mount Agri (Mt. Ararat) reaches 5,137 m close to the borders with Armenia and Iran. Steep slopes are common throughout the Country, while flat or gently sloping land makes up barely one-sixth of the total area (Nippon Koei Co., Ltd., Recs International Inc., 2000).

Protected area management and conservation in Turkey Institutional arrangements for protected areas

The concept of protected area management and conservation in Turkey started as early as 1937 when Land Hunting Law (number 3167) was enacted. Among institutional structures responsible for protected areas of Turkey, the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (EMOF), the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (MARA), and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (MCT) play important roles. Preservation of many cultural and historical assets has been included in various laws such as those on Forests, National Parks, Preservation of Natural and Historical Assets, Environment, Coasts, and the Bosphorus (Nippon Koei Co., Ltd., Recs International Inc., 2000).

The National Parks Law was enacted in 1983. The new National Park Law provides a legal framework of protected area inside and outside forest area. It defines five different types of protective status: namely, 1) National Parks, 2) Nature Parks, 3) Nature Monuments, 4) Nature Reserves, and 5) Wildlife Reserves. General Directorate of National Parks, Game and Wildlife (GDNPGW) of EMOF manages these protected areas, although some of them may be situated outside forest regimes.

The first national park in Turkey was established in 1958. Since then their numbers have increased to 38. Some of these parks, which were initially established for archeological and historical purposes are at the same time rich habitats where biological diversity is being protected. As of 2007, there are 38 National Parks all around Turkey, and their total surfaces

874 616 hectares. 19 national park are in the mountainous area in Turkey. One of them is the Kaçkar Mountains National Park.

The Kaçkar Mountains National Park

The Kaçkar Mountains National Park is situated in the East Black Sea Region in the north-eastern corner of Turkey. The Park was created in 1994 and covers 51,500 hectares.

The Kaçkars are the highest range in the Eastern Black Sea Mountains, and rise parallel to the coast behind Rize. The Kaçkar summit, at an altitude of 3932 meters, is the highest point in the range. The seaward slopes of the system, like their southern counterparts that face the Çoruh basin, are steep and formidable. Starting from the shore, the local topography suddenly becomes steeper toward the south. Consider that the summit of Mount Kaçkar, 3932 meters high (13,061 ft.) is only 50 kilometers from the sea as the crow flies (Somuncu, 1989). That is just thirty miles.

Extensive glacier and water erosion have given these mountains their craggy, rugged look, and they are known for the complexity and power of the streams and rivers which rush down to the lower altitudes. In fact, this range is the third most important glacial region in Turkey following the Mount Agri (Mt. Ararat) and Cilo-Sat Mountains. Today, there are some large glaciers in the Kaçkar Mountain National Park.

Humidity along the eastern Black Sea coast is high the year round, with moderately warm summers and cool rather than cold winters. The result is rich vegetation of great variety. As the terrain slopes upward to the south, with consequently chiller air, zones of intriguingly varied flora present themselves. Along the shoreline from sea level to an altitude of 750 meters, there are deciduous trees and dense undergrowth. Between 750 and 1500 meters, some of these deciduous trees share the niche with an evergreen, the eastern spruce (*Picea orientalis*). The third band, from 1500 meters to the timberline at 2000-2100 meters, plays host to evergreen alone. And beyond there are gentle but bracing alpine meadows. Azalea (*Rhododendron*) is only seen on 3000 meters in the Kaçkar Mountain National Park in Turkey.

These forests and pastures are replete with wildlife, in an impressive list that includes the chamois, wild goat, deer, brown bear, wildcat, stone marten, pine marten, rabbit, fox, wolf, jackal, badger, lynx etc.

There are 11 villages and 44 *yaylas* in the National Park. (Summer pasture Turkish word is *yayla*.) Villagers mainly keep cattle, sheep and goats, or live off the forest, and to lesser degree they farm. Tea is far and away the leading crop of the coastal strip, Rize being Turkey's one and only producer and processor of this leaf. In the mountains there is not enough land for extensive agriculture, so livestock breeding takes its place. Livestock farming as a household activity has significant place in the local economy. In early summer, rural families move to summer pasturage with their stock. Taking place in the Alpine layer above 2000 meters in average, summer pasturage have significant functions for purposes of

both animal husbandry and of passing the summer in a cooler environment (Karadeniz and Somuncu, 2003). Rural families live in wood cabins in *yaylas*, to return again to their villages with the approach of autumn. The trek up from the village and back down again three months later.

Tourism in the Kaçkar Mountains National Park

Owing to both its natural features and cultural structure, the National Park has become one of the important points of attraction for mountain and this context mostly include climbing, trekking, camping, photography, flora, fauna and natural beauty-seeing, meeting the local people who live in *yaylas* and learning about their lifestyle. In recent years, the Park is a well known and popular destination for Turkish tourists and is visited by a growing number of foreign tourists as well. Owing to these activities, the local people earn from accommodation, transportation, souvenir sales, guidance services, etc., which further add to rural economy. The accommodation potential of the park amounts about 1000 beds. The characteristic feature of tourism here is its seasonality having its peak during summer months. The average number of tourists per year is over 100.000 visitors.

The effects of tourism in the Kaçkar Mountains National Park

It is possible to divide the effects of tourism in the Kaçkar Mountains National Park in three categories.

- Economic effects,
- Socio-cultural effects,
- Ecological effects.

Economic effects

- The tourism of National Park provides money inflow and increase in income not only for low-income villagers who live within borders of the National Park and but also for the towns and villages around the National Park.
- Since tourism is a service-based sector that requires more manpower, the development of tourism creates new job opportunities for local people.

Socio-cultural effects

- Another positive effect of tourism is related with the employment of women. Along with the development of tourism in the national park, local women have begun to work in touristic enterprises belonging to their families. Thus, the role of women, who were engaged in housework and agricultural activities before, in the family has started to change today.
- Parallel to development of tourism, host-guest relationship has begun to change in a positive way.

- Although not very widespread, quite high commercialization in tourism supply has begun to be observed.
- Tourism develops against traditional rural life style.

Ecological effects

- The gradual increase in the number of visitors coming to the National Park increases the pressure on the ecosystem.
- In addition to construction of hotels and pensions for touristic purposes in the park, the number of secondary houses constructed for recreational purposes also increases. While some of these buildings are in harmony with local architecture and the environment, some of them are not.
- The existing mountain and *yayla* roads are being broadened and new roads are being built for the higher *yaylas*, which have no road access. This situation results in gradual increase in the vehicle traffic density in the National Park. And this density causes parking lot problem in touristic *yaylas* and noise pollution.
- Parallel to increase in the number of visitors coming to the National Park, there is an increase in amount of solid and liquid wastes discharged to the natural environment.
- For meeting heating demand of accommodation enterprises in *yaylas* in the National Park and secondary houses whose number increases day by day, illegal tree cutting is performed in the forest. This situation is both legally and environmentally unacceptable.
- The fact that the number of pathways the mountaineers and trekkers follow in high mountainous areas and that these pathways continuously broaden in time cause erosion in steep slopes.
- There are too many solid wastes in camping areas where thousands of mountaineers camp in the area for climbing. These wastes are sometimes left to the environment where they are produced.
- Shampoo, soap and detergents that are used for cleaning purposes in villages, *yaylas* and camping areas in high places are directly poured into rivers. Such act damages ecosystem.

That fact that there are many negativities as well as positive developments that arise in the National Park parallel to tourism has some certain reasons including the following:

- Firstly, the National Park has no management plan yet. And the National Park Long Period Development Plan (Master plans: scale of 1:5,000), on which Ministry of Environment and Forestry still works, has not been completed yet.
- Majority of local people and tourists are not conscious enough in environmental protection.

- Along with the increase in number of tourists coming to the National Park, local people become more and more desired to earn more money. However, the desire for protecting the environment is attached secondary attention.

For this reason, with the aim of providing sustainable tourism in the National Park, national park management and some non-governmental organizations have initiated joint studies in recent years. Primary non-governmental organizations that cooperate with National Park management for improving sustainable tourism in the Kaçkar Mountains National Park are:

- Nature Association,
- Black Sea Environment Association,
- Kaçkar Mountaineering, Rafting and Ski Club.

Among these NGO's, Nature Association has made the experts prepare the Kaçkar Mountains National Park Ecotourism Management Plan in cooperation with national park management. Main objective of Kaçkar Mountains National Park Ecotourism Management Plan is: To protect biologic diversity in the Kaçkar Mountains National Park, to eliminate negative pressures on natural resources and to develop sustainable tourism activities including all related groups, in line with ecotourism principles in a structure that will contribute in improvement of socio-economic structure of local societies. However, as the master plan studies of the National Park have not been completed yet, ecotourism management plan has not been implemented yet. At this stage, non-governmental organizations carry out activities to increase the awareness of local people in terms of sustainable tourism. To this end, under the leadership of non-governmental organizations, local people are educated on the sustainable tourism via various programs which include specialists.

Conclusion

The highest authority in protected areas in Turkey is the Ministry of Environment and Forestry. So, it is the authorized ministry in the management of protected areas. Even if the Ministry of Environment and Forestry, which has the authority in National Parks, is in cooperation in recent years with non-governmental organizations in some issues about protected mountainous areas, it has no tendency to share the authority or responsibility with any institution or organization in terms of area management. Consequently, the role of non-governmental organizations in protected mountainous areas is limited to encouraging scientific researches in protection of areas and sustainable tourism and to carry out activities for increasing the awareness of local people.

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